

# **Silence-making on social media**

On the new censorship of online spaces,  
in Indonesia and elsewhere

# Introduction

As a publisher and a digital native, I have always been intrigued by the way netizenship informs citizenship, and vice versa. Growing up in Indonesia in the 1990s, I saw a positive correlation between the two—where the emergence of the Internet seemed to both coincide with and contribute to the country's transition to democracy. Indeed, the first few years of post-authoritarianism Indonesia was marked by a sense of optimism; and the valorization of networked media as technologies of freedom (Lim, 2017).

For a while, the utopian vision held up. Throughout the early 2000s, we enjoyed a period of swift diversification, decentralization and deregulation of our media industries. After decades of military rule, freedom of expression had become a right for all Indonesians; and thanks to the social Web, we were now also free to connect. By 2018, at least 130 million Indonesians were active Internet users, spending an average of 3,5 hours on social media every day (We Are Social, 2018). Today, platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have become inseparable to various aspects of Indonesian society, including politics, activism and youth culture.

However, a wave of religious and political conservatism is now sweeping across the region. As a result, rising tensions between political factions and ethnic groups are putting renewed pressures on freedom of expression in the country. Throughout the last five years, the state has intensified its censorship activities, drawing up stringent laws on precarious issues like defamation, blasphemy and pornography (Heryanto, 2018). Online, social media platforms are becoming heated battlegrounds, as organized groups use it to spread post-truth politics and populist propaganda.

It's becoming clear that deliberate and creative activism is needed to help more vulnerable netizens in particular resist the rising pressures of state and self-censorship online. Thus, in an attempt to talk back to these problematics, this thesis aims to address at least two questions. Learning from the specific context of Indonesia, how do old and new forms of censorship manifest themselves in contemporary social media spaces? And knowing that social media is often used to amplify some voices while suppressing others, what tactics are available to us to challenge these mechanisms?

## Part 1 Old Wounds

To understand the current state of censorship in Indonesia, we first have to consider the volatile history of media power in the country. What does freedom of speech mean in this specific, post-colonial context? And crucially, what is the experience of dissent in mainstream media and how does this extend to politics?

In Western contexts, the right to free expression is well established as one of the most important tenets of democracy, and of the notion of the public sphere (Habermas, 1991). In contrast, the role of media freedom in Indonesian civil society remains unsettled and regularly contested (Steele, 2011). In the last century alone, opponents included the Dutch and Japanese colonial powers which were finally ousted during Indonesian independence in 1945, and the authoritarian regime of President Suharto, who took government control in 1966 and retained his position for more than thirty years (Ricklefs, 1993). Throughout these critical times in Indonesian history, censorship was actively exercised by the state across political, legal and psychological dimensions. Under these pressures, it's unsurprising that mainstream Indonesian media has tended to serve the interests of the state, doing little to challenge prevailing social or cultural hegemonies. To place our discussions on freedom of speech in context, this section will examine some of the political and cultural events that have brought us to where we are today.

*Censorship is defined as the act or system of practice suppressing, limiting, or deleting objectionable or any other kind of speech.*

(Delbert, 2008)

### NO OPPOSITION ALLOWED

First, it's important to take a close look at the role of mainstream media in President Suharto's Indonesia. A respected military figure, Suharto became President amidst extreme social upheaval in 1966 and remained unchallenged in office until 1998. In his three decades of uninterrupted rule (an era known as the 'New Order'), he sought to unify the country and was successful in bringing about a period of economic prosperity and political stability (Elson, 2002). But the price of success was high and Suharto's legacy is one marred by violence, corruption and extensive human rights abuses (Shubert, 2008). Nicknamed 'The

Smiling General', he was charming but lethal—and actively censored dissent in the Indonesian press. Writing about that time, journalist Andreas Harsono says: "No opposition was allowed. Disagreement usually ended up in violent crackdowns" (1996). Under government orders, editors were known to have blacked out entire articles of newspapers as they went to press (Dhyatmika, 2014). And though not always successful, by treating public criticism as a direct threat to national security, Suharto was able to present any act of retaliation as valid and necessary.

One of the New Order's main weapons in maintaining legitimacy and spreading propaganda, was the powerful 'Ministry of Information'. Through this governing body, Suharto was able to closely monitor and restrict both domestic and foreign media (Aspinall, 2010). As a result, while living standards in the country rose, media freedom dwindled. Furthermore, whenever citizens protested, the state would respond by extending its censorship policies (Sen, 2011). In 1984, a law was passed requiring all publishing bodies to possess a press operating license which could be revoked at any time by the Ministry of Information (Aspinall, 2010). Over the next decade, the government used this legal precedent to scare private media owners into submission and to close down dozens of newspapers (Sen, 2011).

Next to editorial control of what was being reported over the news, Suharto also held the reins of the domestic entertainment industry. Under his rule, media ownership was dominated by just a few names in his elite political circle (Ida, 2011). Television in particular became an influential tool for controlling public opinion and nation-building, favoured by Suharto for its reach and velocity (Kitley, 2003). From its first transmission in 1962 until 1989, the state-owned service *TVRI* enjoyed a total monopoly over television broadcasting in Indonesia. Playing into cold-war tensions, subjects like communism—and to some extent, feminism—were made taboo, affecting cultural attitudes for decades to come (Wieringa, 1995).

However, by the 1990s the growing Indonesian middle class was becoming restless with Suharto's autocracy. Buffeted by the winds of globalisation and strained under a looming economic crisis, the government's grip on both politics and social issues was starting to loosen (Philpott, 2000). During this time, Suharto tried to keep control of mainstream media using the same tactics of bureaucratic interference and violent intimidation. In fact, as recently as June 1994, the government

shut down prominent news weeklies *TEMPO*, *Detik* and *Editor* after they published critical reports on Suharto's military spending. In the aftermath, journalists and protestors were thrown in jail. As a result, reporters openly admitted that self-censorship had become a professional ritual (Harsono, 1996). It is clear—and significant—that under Suharto's leadership, entire generations of Indonesians were brought up in a media culture where free speech had become more of a risk than a right.

## A SINGULAR IDENTITY

Besides the legal and the political, we must also consider the psychological dimensions of censorship. Suharto in particular was adept at shaping collective memory—and to some extent—revising history. The most striking example of this is the media blackout of the 1965 anti-communist purge, in which an estimated 500,000 to 1 million Indonesians were systematically and violently murdered by the state (Kwok, 2016). The massacre occurred at the height of the Cold War, triggered by an attempted coup which was blamed on the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). In retaliation, Suharto's army proceeded to imprison and kill every PKI party member and suspected leftist in the country (Heryanto, 2018). This state-sponsored witch-hunt resulted in the elimination of every communist faction in Indonesian politics, and the decimation of the country's ethnic Chinese minority (Wieringa, 1995). Though today, this episode has been declared one of the bloodiest mass killings in modern history, Suharto's tight control of the media means it has been all but erased from the nation's collective memory (Heryanto, 2018).

In this context, it was cinema which became the most popular and influential medium in Suharto's propaganda machine. Throughout the following decades, the state sponsored the production of dozens of films on the 1965 tragedy, including the persuasive *Pengkhianatan G30 September* (Noer, 1984), a 4,5 hour epic which glorifies the actions of the military and vilifies their opponents. For most Indonesians, this film became the primary—perhaps the only—source of information on the events of 1965. At the same time, history textbooks were rewritten, edited by the same pro-Suharto historian who penned the original inspiration for the film (Renaldi, 2018). In this way, media censorship in the time of Suharto was not merely a tool for erasing certain narratives, or even whole segments, of Indonesian society. It also allowed the state to

replace these narratives with ‘the official version’ of events, and proscribe any kind of social criticism as subversive and communist (Wieringa, 1995). As post-colonial scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot puts it:

*Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance). (1995, p. 26)*

For a country so diverse as Indonesia, these silence-making mechanisms were exceptionally useful in establishing (and maintaining) a singular identity for the nation and its citizens. While this may have helped create political stability at one time, it has also resulted in some deep-seated social issues. To this day, the events of 1965 remain one of the most sensitive in Indonesian history, and the public discourse around it is marked with both wilful amnesia and misinformation (Renaldi, 2018).

## THE CONTROL OF CULTURE

The tendency to forget rather than confront certain parts of our history, adds another dimension to the impact and effectiveness of censorship in Indonesia. Practiced for long enough, repressive policies become quickly assimilated into our culture, which is traditionally hierarchical (Collins & Bahar, 2000). Following this, it’s important to note that when it comes to freedom of expression, state control represents only one facet. Both religion and tradition have always played an important role in the public life of Indonesians, and it’s useful to look at how power and censorship manifests itself in our prescribed social and cultural values.

To begin, we should bear in mind that Indonesia consists of hundreds of distinct native ethnic groups, spread across some 16,000 islands. The largest group and the most politically dominant by far, are the Javanese, who make up some 40% of the entire population (Philpott, 2000). Like most South-East Asian cultures, Javanese can be described as a ‘shame society’, as opposed to a ‘guilt society’ (Collins & Bahar, 2000). Popularized by cultural anthropologist Ruth Benedict,

the distinction lies in the way that morality is constructed and used. In guilt societies (often Western), internal structures take precedence: like that of individual authority and conscience. In shame societies, external factors are more important: how does your community see you? In Indonesia this manifests itself in social structures in which pride, politeness, honor and collectivity are central cultural values, shaping everything from practices in conflict-management to politics and art (Vanhoe, 2016). Under the New Order, these principles were mobilized to support relations of hierarchy and deference, and to some extent, constrain individuality (Collins & Bahar, 2000). Suharto’s rhetoric was powerful and simple: if ‘being Indonesian’ meant a return to traditional values, then to speak out in any kind of insubordination was to mark yourself as *un-Indonesian*.

It’s also worth looking at the ways that traditional beliefs and customs affect the expression of gender roles in Indonesia. Censorship, whether formal or informal, is always attached to dynamics of power, and in a patriarchal society, it tends to disproportionately affect women, limiting their public activity, voice and agency (Collins & Bahar, 2000). In a series of letters written at the turn of the twentieth century, R.A. Kartini, considered Indonesia’s founding feminist, laments the rigid structures and institutions of Javanese womanhood. As both a member of local aristocracy and a subject of Dutch colonialism, her freedoms were heavily restricted:

*All our institutions are directly opposed to the progress for which I so long for the sake of our people (...) But we Javanese women must first of all be gentle and submissive; we must be as clay. (Kartini, 1921)*

During her time, practices like polygamy and child marriage were customary in Indonesia, while girls’ education was practically nonexistent (Woodward, 2015). While many of these traditions have evolved or disappeared with time, gender roles in Indonesia continue to be impacted by the whims of politics and religion.

Ultimately, these forces make for a complex media landscape. Throughout the periods of Dutch Imperialism, Independence, and the New Order, censorship has clearly played a fundamental role in supporting both political power and national identity in Indonesia. But after decades of repression, the mid-90s had become a time of mass

public discontent. This was the stage on which, in 1998, the combination of a financial crisis and a student-led protest movement finally forced Suharto to resign from office; and the country entered a new era of democracy (Philpott, 2000). At precisely the same time, a digital revolution was sweeping across the region, bringing with it a stream of new tools and networks, from the E-mail to the World Wide Web. Knowing this, my next question is: How did the expansion of Internet culture affect freedom of speech in Indonesia? In the next section, we will look at the ways in which new and networked media have transformed the public voice in Indonesian society.

## Part 2 New Media

First, a concession: the relationship between the Internet and democracy is anything but straightforward. Since its globalization, it has been hailed as a tool for freedom, and in equal measures denounced as a machine of control (Chun, 2006). While debate continues, the fact remains that at the end of the twentieth century, the overthrow of several authoritarian governments across Asia coincided exactly with the dramatic spread of this new medium (Sen & Hill, 2011). In Indonesia, the arrival of Internet technologies in the mid 1990s was a boon to both free speech advocates and political activists. By breaking media monopolies, allowing anonymous communications and providing unfiltered flows of information, the emergence of the Internet in Indonesia was—at least—a catalyst to its political revolution (Lim, 2003). But how exactly was media reform accomplished? And looking through the lens of the present, how does the digital revolution continue to challenge censorship cultures in Indonesia today?

### FROM THE WARNET TO THE REFORMATION

To understand the Indonesian Internet we have to begin at its smallest but most popular access point: the *warnet*. Short for *warung* Internet (Internet café in Indonesian), these hybrid spaces first appeared in 1995, bringing independent dial-up connections to the wider Indonesian society (Warf, 2013). Often built on top of existing cultural sites, for example as extensions to local food halls or minimarkets, the *warnet* represented more than just an entry point to cyberspace. During the last years of the New Order, they also provided a civic space for dialogue, and for both the production and consumption of public discourse (Lim, 2003). This social component made the *warnet* specifically effective in supporting grassroots citizen action. Connected as they were to traditional network structures, information was able to spread beyond the computer and throughout the neighborhoods. Suddenly, those with limited power were able to access previously unavailable information, and to challenge the hierarchies of ‘old media’.

Following this, it was students and journalists who were the first to





truly exploit the Internet in Indonesia, using it to communicate and organize against the control of the state (Harsono, 1996). Underground mailing lists became a powerful new tool to share controversial information like news related to the Indonesian Communist Party, details of Suharto's wrongdoings, or even reports by journalists who were shut out of the mainstream media (Lim,

2003). The most popular of these served daily dispatches from both local and foreign newspapers, with links to critical sources and most crucially, with instructions on how to further disseminate the information via fax and print-outs (idem). By early 1998, controversial documents (including a list of Suharto's wealth) had spread through the lists like wildfire, circulating from warnet to warnet and photocopy to photocopy (Lim, 2003). As the pressure mounted, it became clear that old tactics of censorship could no longer hold these new networks of information. In May of the same year, Suharto resigned; opening up the path to a fully-fledged Indonesian democracy.

In the years that followed, press freedom practically exploded across Indonesia. A new period of reform had begun, characterized by a process of democratization and decentralization (Sen, 2011). Within months, the newly appointed President Habibie overturned the draconian licensing regimes of the New Order. In 1999, a landmark Press Law was passed, which limited the power of the government and guaranteed the fundamental principles of freedom of expression (Steele, 2018). As Suharto's Ministry of Information was abolished, local and alternative media institutions flourished (Ida, 2011). Journalists and citizens alike remember the end of the 90s as a politically and culturally transformative period. Thanks to these chaotic but progressive years, Indonesian news media and pop culture was finally becoming more diverse.

## A NEW GENERATION OF NETIZENS

Over the next decade, the Indonesian media landscape continued to change rapidly. Spurred on by the rapid growth of tech industries in Asia, and the rising population of the urban middle class, mobile phone

and internet usage skyrocketed in the early 2000s (Heryanto, 2018). As the nation continued to develop its political identity post-Suharto, the digital sphere expanded dramatically, providing new platforms of dialogue between high and popular culture; and mainstream and alternative activities. Today, with a user base of over 130 million people, Indonesia has the largest and fastest growing Internet economy in the region (Singh, 2018).

But what are these users doing online? Studies show that like many of its post-colonial neighbours, Indonesia has taken to social media with exceptional fervor (Abbott, 2011). By 2012, 90% of online activities in the country were devoted to browsing social networking sites, with Facebook, Youtube and Instagram as the dominating platforms (Hapsoro, 2018). In fact, Indonesia now has the fourth largest number of Facebook users in the world, and the third largest for Instagram (We Are Social, 2018). In contrast, traditional mass media industries in the country seem sluggish and elitist—most of them controlled by the same 12 companies, many with direct affiliations with political parties (Tapsell, 2017). Considering this, it's unsurprising that so many Indonesians wasted no time in embracing the Social Web.

Meme culture in particular has become inseparable from Indonesian public discourse, thanks to its polyvocal nature, its accessibility and its capacity for subversion. Another reason why, is that memes encapsulate a fundamental aspect of modern digital culture: sharing. In her 2014 book, Limor Shifman defines memes as groups of digital items with common characteristics, which are self-aware and socially constructed, then transformed via the Internet by many users. She goes on to say that, "Although memes spread on a micro basis, their impact is on the macro level: memes shape the mindsets, forms of behaviour and actions of social groups." (p.17) It is this link between self and the collective, the personal and the political, which have made memes such successful channels for humour and social criticism, especially in a culture which is traditionally non-confrontational.

In Indonesia, they have also been extraordinarily effective in bringing politics to the masses (and vice versa). The rise of Internet culture has in itself changed the way we perceive political participation, as something that was once a practical and formal activity (of voting, for example) to something that includes more informal interactions like commenting on news items or following meme accounts (Hapsoro,

2018). But it was not until the 2014 presidential elections, when satirical memes took on a central role in Indonesian politics, becoming a driving force in the intense contestation between the two main candidates, Prabowo Subianto and Joko Widodo (Wadipalapa, 2015). Later, in 2017, election-memes once again performed as a distinctive means of discourse in the Jakarta gubernatorial election. By bringing with it the codes of pop culture, memes were making Indonesian politics— and crucially, political dissent—more accessible, especially to young people.

**\*\*Add visual examples of memes**

All things considered, networked media culture has proven to be a vital political force in Indonesian civil society. Vital, because of its reach and velocity, and political, because it has so much to do with power— and because its position as the vernacular media of the masses will always be contested by the mainstream institutions which precede it. In Indonesia, this tension is made more acute by the latter's historical role as purveyors of propaganda and censorship. But what happens when these mechanisms evolve? While facilitating freedom of expression, social media is also being used to promote unprecedented forms of surveillance, spread misinformation, and support the rise of online radical groups (Lim, 2017). Knowing that technology in itself is never neutral (Haraway, 1991), we must ask not just what social media *does*, but also how it works, and for whom.



## Part 3

### Backlash

Today, the optimism of the so-called Reformation era is on the wane. Twenty years after the explosive onset of both democratic and media freedom, Indonesia is facing yet another crossroads in its political and cultural evolution. This time it is the rise of conservatism and political Islam which pose a challenge to our hard-won freedom of expression (Heryanto, 2018). The effects are at times confusing and alarming: while media usage and access to information in the country seems to be growing, the scope and diversity of discourses seem to be shrinking. In fact, according to a recent index on media freedom, Indonesia was the worst-performing country in 2017, falling by 20 places in the global rankings from 48th to 68th position (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017). In this section, we will take a closer look at the current state of freedom of speech in Indonesia, paying special attention to the formal and informal silencing mechanisms which play out online.

#### BLOCKED SITES AND BLURRED BODIES

Precisely because the Internet has been so valuable to freedom of speech in Indonesia, it has in itself become a target for censorship and regulation. This is a phenomenon which extends throughout the region and can be traced back to the period directly following September 11, 2001. Since then, governments like China and Singapore have increased surveillance activities online, erecting firewalls and arresting cyber-dissidents (Gan, Gomez & Johannsen, 2004). In Indonesia, it was not until 2008, amid rising religious and ethnic tensions in the country, that selective blocking of some websites began.

In the first reported case, the government placed a temporary ban on all file-sharing video websites, including Youtube, in an attempt to censor the anti-Islamic film, *Fitna*. The government cited fear of unrest within the nation as the reason for the ban, a justification they would come to use regularly over the next decade (OpenNet Initiative, 2011). Later the same year, two controversial legislations were passed: the Electronic Information and Transaction (ITE) Law, and the Anti-Pornography law, which gave the Indonesian government authority to prosecute against the dissemination of any content they considered

“negative” or “culturally inappropriate,”—terms so broad that it includes everything from terrorism to defamation and nudity (Freedom House, 2017). Furthermore, the 2008 bill presents a bafflingly loose definition of what constitutes pornography, “to the point of criminalizing actions such as the kissing of lips in public, the display of sensual parts of the body, or any form of art perceived to be explicit” (Open Net Initiative, 2011). Here we see how easily the censorship of media in Indonesia becomes a censorship on behaviour.

Today, web blocking continues to trouble Indonesian cyberactivists and average citizens alike. Try to access pop culture touchstones like Vimeo, Tumblr or Reddit and you’ll be greeted with a government block-page. In January 2018, a new filtering system was launched which crawls the internet and issues alerts whenever “negative” or “pornographic” material is found (Davies, 2018). Casting with such a crude net means that these activities are especially harmful to fragile communities who depend on the Internet as an alternative space for self-actualization. Indeed, this system is routinely utilised in the censorship of gay and lesbian content on the Indonesian Web (Widiyanto, 2016).

Censorship in the realm of film and television broadcasting has also been on the uptick in the last several years. Using the same rhetoric of protecting ‘decency’ and ‘public dignity’, the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission have amped up their surveillance activities, again with disproportionate scrutiny on sexuality and nudity. In 2015, scenes from several cartoons including *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Doraemon* were blurred to hide the bodies of female characters wearing swimsuits (Siddharta, 2017). In 2016, during a Miss Indonesia pageant, broadcasters blurred contestants’ entire torsos while wearing the *kebaya*, the traditional Javanese attire for women (Rustan, 2016). While the incident was ridiculed in memes and messageboards across the country, accountability remains scarce. To this day, many governing institutions seem more concerned with controlling the female image, than tackling breaches of journalistic ethics (Siddharta, 2017).

## MEDIA AND MORALITY

It’s clear that in comparison to the political censorship that characterised the New Order, the current landscape of media control in Indonesia is more focussed on social and cultural regulation. This supports



the recent, palpable shift in Indonesian civil society towards a more conservative political and religious identity. Thanks to an amalgam of national and transnational forces, the moderate brand of Islam which Indonesia was once known for (and which I clearly remember from my childhood) is quickly losing ground to a more restrictive and myopic version. As another presidential election approaches later this year, one question looms larger than any other: Where are we headed as a nation, if we no longer agree on secularism nor democracy?

In this loaded atmosphere, where both sides of the political spec-

trum are scrambling to gain favour and influence, discourse around what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' media is treated as wider issues of public morality. As media theorist Jennifer Lindsay describes,

*The proscriptive role of religion in determining clear rules of behaviour, of determining guidelines of right and wrong, found a match in the proscriptive role of media regulation, which establishes clear guidelines about what can and cannot be shown, to whom, where, when and under what conditions. (Lindsay, 2011, p. 188).*

Clearly, when the boundaries between mediated and non-mediated worlds become blurred, the desire to control one cannot be separated from the desire to control the other.

*"I know for a fact that some news rooms have adopted a more conservative stance (...) in order to prevent being accused of things like insulting religion."*

(Devi Asmarani)

For this reason, to talk about censorship in Indonesia today is to open up an increasingly complex can of worms. It's no longer enough to look at the regulatory actions of the state, or indeed at the destabilizing role of new media technologies. We must also consider less visible kinds of oppression, not least because it is in this space where self-censorship eventuates. Against the backdrop of intense political contestations, Indonesian citizens are increasingly policing themselves and each other. Fear—of scandal as much as of punishment—becomes the single most potent editorial force in this honor-shame society, influencing everything from what journalists write in the papers to how women dress in the streets (Tapsell, 2012).

This message is reinforced every time a high-profile detractor is jailed. In 2016, the incumbent governor of Jakarta became embroiled in the most heated blasphemy case ever to play out in the public sphere. The politician in question, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, known as Ahok, is progressive, Chinese-Indonesian and also the city's first Christian governor in nearly fifty years. Though loved by many on the left, his unconventional identity made him a controversial figure. Playing into religious and ethnic intolerances, his opposition mounted a smear campaign on social media. Tensions escalated quickly, coming to a head in December 2016. In reaction to a single remark Ahok had made about the Quran, hundreds of thousands of Indonesians marched in Jakarta, demanding that he be arrested for allegedly insulting Islam (Lim, 2017).

Once again, social media played a central role in the events that followed. Using hashtags such as #aksibelaIslam (action to defend Islam), #aksibelaQuran (action to defend Quran), and #penjarakanAhok (jail Ahok), his opposition flooded news feeds in the country. By the time of his trial, facts had been thoroughly obfuscated and stakes had become desperately high. In the face of a divided country, would President Joko Widodo, once an ally to Ahok, be brave enough to step in? Or would Ahok be martyred to placate the angry masses? In a controversial decision, the courts ultimately sided with the mobs and sentenced the governor to two years in jail.

## DON'T FEED THE TROLLS

Cases like these point to the immense social and political influence of organized Internet commenters and paid propaganda. Using sophisticated networks of sock-puppet accounts and automated bots, political parties around the world are quickly learning to wield social media and its click-driven algorithms as a weapon. In the 2016 US presidential election, Cambridge Analytica turned trolling into a service: aggregating more than 80 million Facebook users' data to analyze, mobilize and then exploit specific audiences on the platform (Watts, 2018). In Russia, "troll armies" with multimillion-dollar budgets are waging opinion wars on behalf of the Kremlin (Sindelar, 2014). A few thousand kilometers away, advocates for President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, continue to run some of the most effective disinformation campaigns in history, led by groups of up to 800,000 members (Ressa, 2016).

In Indonesia, low levels of media literacy add more fuel to the fire. A recent study found that at least 62% of Indonesian netizens have received fake news items via hard-to-police chat services like WhatsApp, while 92% of respondents received them on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube (Renaldi, 2018).

The largest known group responsible for spreading this kind of incendiary material in Indonesia call themselves the Muslim Cyber Army (MCA). Members describe MCA as a shadow organization, with no central office or leader, working in the legal grey area to deliver coordinated political and religious campaigns across popular platforms. One of its most notable activities, is the harassment and intimidation of individuals deemed to have insulted Islam online (Juniarto, 2018).

Immediately following the blasphemy proceedings against Ahok in 2016, the MCA started a closed Facebook group which encouraged members to add names to a list of ‘People Wanted by the Muslim Community’. The MCA have also been known to manufacture offensive imitation profiles of their critics, and even to acquire and mobilise the accounts of dead people (ibid.).

Through mass confusion, these operations are able to divide and conquer almost any issue. In Indonesia, religious fundamentalists have become the local equivalent of America’s alt-right: just as adept at on-line disruption and manipulation, waging cyberwarfare right under the noses of most netizens (Lindsey, 2018). And just like the alt-right, their activities affect more than electoral politics, spreading populist and supremacist ideologies throughout all levels of society.

## ON CYBERMISOGYNY

Women are particularly vulnerable in this social media culture. In Indonesia and elsewhere, women are becoming more active online; however, the Internet continues to be a male-dominated space (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015). In Silicon Valley offices, in troll farms and on 4Chan messageboards, men outnumber women consistently. Where this becomes immediately more problematic is in the level of verbal and sexual harassment directed at women online. In 2014, the so-called ‘GamerGate’ controversy brought this issue into the spotlight, as a number of prominent female gamers endured a vicious campaign of cybermisogyny that included death threats, rape threats and doxxing (the leaking of private information) (Webber, 2017).

Since then, little has changed. A recent study conducted by Amnesty International found that on average, a woman is abused on Twitter every 30 seconds (2018). In cultures like Indonesia, where gender norms are so closely linked to religion, Islamist conservatives increasingly police what women can and can’t do on social media, sometimes to devastating effect. In September 2018, the 22 year-old Iraqi model and social media star Tara Fares was gunned down by unknown assailants in Baghdad. Reports warned that the killing was part of “a targeted effort against young women believed to be shirking the country’s conservative traditions” (Specia, 2018).

In Indonesia, efforts to suppress women’s voices and images online

are also intensifying. Over the past few years, religious programming on television have become more popular, while self-appointed Muslim clerics are taking to Youtube to deliver dramatic sermons about the right and wrong way to be a Muslim. Using sensationalist headlines and colorful memes, these pseudo-spiritual leaders tell women to wear niqabs or chadors, marry young and renounce education. Feminists are labeled ‘anti-Islam’ and gender equality painted as a ‘Western ideology’, while at the same time, old taboos, like inter-faith relationships, are reinstated with vigor. On Instagram—one of the fastest growing platforms among Indonesian women—dogmatic hashtags like #antiselfie, #indonesiatanpapacaran (self-described as “A movement to erase pre-marital dating from Indonesia”) and #akhwat-bercadar (Muslim sisters in chadors) are gaining momentum.

I’ve also come across an entire industry promoting so-called ‘account-deleting’ services. These profiles target young Muslim women who have recently started wearing the hijab, and tell them they must erase all evidence of their previous, ‘unholy’ lives—including any avatar or selfie published online—lest they be punished in the afterlife. This is yet another example of how censorship in Indonesia has become entangled with the language of intimidation and even revisionism. As a biracial, non-muslim Indonesian woman myself, I find these trends jarring and deeply discomforting. And I am not alone: fearing persecution, average netizens are learning to steer clear of sensitive topics online. In a survey I conducted with Indonesian netizens in December 2018, 11/20 respondents say that they engage in self-censorship when conversations turn to politics or religion **\*\*see appendix\*\***. Respondent A (female, age 25-34, Catholic), explains:

*I avoid the subject of religion and politics on social media. Because if someone disagrees with you, you could be bullied. Even worse, it’s not uncommon that you might be threatened with harassment or murder.*

Furthermore, 75% of survey respondents (and the majority of people interviewed during this research) have adopted the attitude that it’s best to disengage with any and all conflict on social media. Between women, one sentiment resonated clearly: even online, it can feel un-

*“Lately I have been very reluctant to talk publicly because I fear persecution and censorship. Today, women are much more vulnerable to being accused of defamation and charged under the ITE law.”*

(Dea Basori)

comfortable to take up space. But between the suggestions to “just skip it”, “report it” or to reduce time on social media entirely, there is a sense of dilemma. As one interviewee put it: “It’s a choice you have to make. Do you want to voice your opinion and face intimidation or not?”

Stories like these emphasize that online censorship is a social problem as much as a technological one. Platforms that once felt emancipatory are devolving into zero-sum games. Indonesian media theorist Merlyna Lim explains the phenomenon as such: “While encouraging freedom of expression, social media also emboldens freedom to hate, where individuals exercise their right to voice their opinions while actively silencing others” (2017). Knowing this, perhaps the next step is to design new ways to talk back to these problematics. By unravelling the silencing mechanisms we use on each other (and ourselves), could we learn to reclaim part of these hostile spaces for ourselves?

## Part 4 Interventions

Unfortunately, self-censorship—both online or offline—is a difficult habit to dismantle. Not least because it has become part and parcel of contemporary Indonesian public culture, perpetuated by politics and nurtured by old patriarchal systems. As a result, even social media has become much less welcoming to alternative conversations and identities. So how can we, as publishers and media activists, intervene? Can we offer new understandings of censorship in the modern era or suggest radical ways to redress the balance? The fourth and final section of this thesis will explore some of the pressure points on the horizon and sketch out potential frameworks for beating censors at their own game.

### OLD AND NEW APPROACHES

In recent years, governments and activists alike have been scrambling to address the problematics of social media. One line of thought involves pushing tech companies to take more responsibility for what is posted on their platforms (Scott, 2018). However, this has proved largely ineffective. While some companies respond by upping the use of human moderation and third-party fact-checkers, little is being done to change the fundamental business model driving the design of these platforms (Tufekci, 2018). As a matter of fact, almost every social media giant has said it would cooperate with local government agencies, blocking content and working on new censorship tools, sometimes on a case-by-case basis (Tan, 2017). In this way, transparency and accountability are becoming more difficult to uphold.

I would suggest that we are doing all citizens (and the Internet) a great disservice when we ask the Zuckerbergs of the world to be the ones to draw the line between free speech and online safety. So, regulatory action aside, what other approaches are available to us as artists and free speech advocates? What existing tactics can we look to, and can we share them with the average netizen? Perhaps, when in troll spaces, we should do as the trolls do. Or can we make allies of existing methodologies, learning from the handbooks of pranksters, hackers and gamers?



To begin with, we should note that efforts to ‘protect the Internet’ go back decades. The term ‘hacktivism’ was coined in 1994, and even before then, skilled computer users and critical media warriors have been responsible for some of the most radical Internet technologies, from open source/free software platforms to P2P networks and encryption systems (Delbert, 2008). Today the movement includes tools that support anonymous communication online (e.g. Tor), systems that circumvent censorship and support privacy (from psiphon and peace-fire, to Marcell Mars’ *Logan and Jessica*) and alternatives to mainstream social networks, such as Mastodon and Telegram.

While these approaches focus on the creation of new technologies, another strategy is to disrupt by infiltrating those which already exist. In China for example, anonymous activists have begun using blockchain to both spread and document censored material (Singh, 2018). Another interesting case is the well-known project *Politwoops*. This web-based service performs as a tweet tracker, combing the accounts of well-known politicians, and recording every deleted post. The resulting archive uses Twitter’s own streaming API to comment on the accountability and transparency of some of its most influential users, offering “a window into what they hoped you didn’t see.” (ProPublica, 2019)

Similar tactics of redirection and reframing are also being used to intervene in conversations within social networking apps. In Myanmar, where pervasive hate speech online has fueled violent attacks on the Rohingya population, one citizen initiative is developing the practice of ‘counterspeech’. This response involves direct, organized counter-messaging campaigns on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, using specific language to undermine and defuse harmful speech acts (Benesch, Ruths et al, 2016). In emphasizing a social and discursive approach, these methods avoid regulatory actions like censorship or takedowns.

## DO FEED THE TROLLS

In Indonesia, efforts to address oppressive and extremist content online still seem scattered at best. One approach favored by activists seems to be one-to-one combat against right-wing radical groups on social media. Loosely affiliated volunteers take to their laptops, smartphones and internet cafés to counter propaganda machines by the Islamic State and its local supporters. Their methods are straightforward

and aimed specifically at reaching young Muslims vulnerable to radicalization. In a recent interview, one volunteer said that his work includes the making of anti-extremist memes, countering negative interpretations of religious quotes, conversing with pro-ISIS accounts and training others in social media literacy (Varagur, 2016).

However, without explicit support from the government or from our mainstream media institutions, right-wing trolls continue to outnumber and outmanoeuvre our activists. Knowing this, some have taken to the old maxim of: if you can’t beat them, join them. Or at least, learn from them. This is where ‘ideological trolling’ emerges. This practice differs from more traditional forms of social media activism in that it deliberately and openly embraces the more deviant aspects of cyberwarfare.

One example that comes to mind is the case of Anonymous, perhaps the world’s most well known collective of trolls turned political activists. Rising out of the depths of 4chan bulletin boards and once denounced by Fox News as “The Internet Hate Machine”, its adherents wear many faces, shifting easily from mischievous trolling raids to high-profile political operations (Coleman, 2014). In the last decade, its members have become key players in global struggles like the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. Today, the group’s unpredictable identity remains one of its defining characteristics:

*Anonymous has no consistent philosophy or political program. Given that Anonymous’s ancestry lies in the sometimes humorous, frequently offensive, and at times deeply invasive world of Internet trolling—the core logic of which seems, at least at first glance, to be inhospitable to the cultivation of activist sensibilities and politicized endeavors—it is remarkable that the name Anonymous became a banner seized by political activists in the first place. (idem.)*

But in one way or another, it has. And with this in mind, one question for further study might be: where do the activities of trolls and Internet activists intersect with the activities of the average Internet user? In particular, can trolldom—the behaviour, the job, the archetype—offer new territories or tools for oppressed voices on the social Web? In the case of Indonesia at least, there’s a satisfying symmetry in the idea that to counter moral censure, we might turn to the tactics of online deviants. Could artistic interventions help facilitate this experimentation?

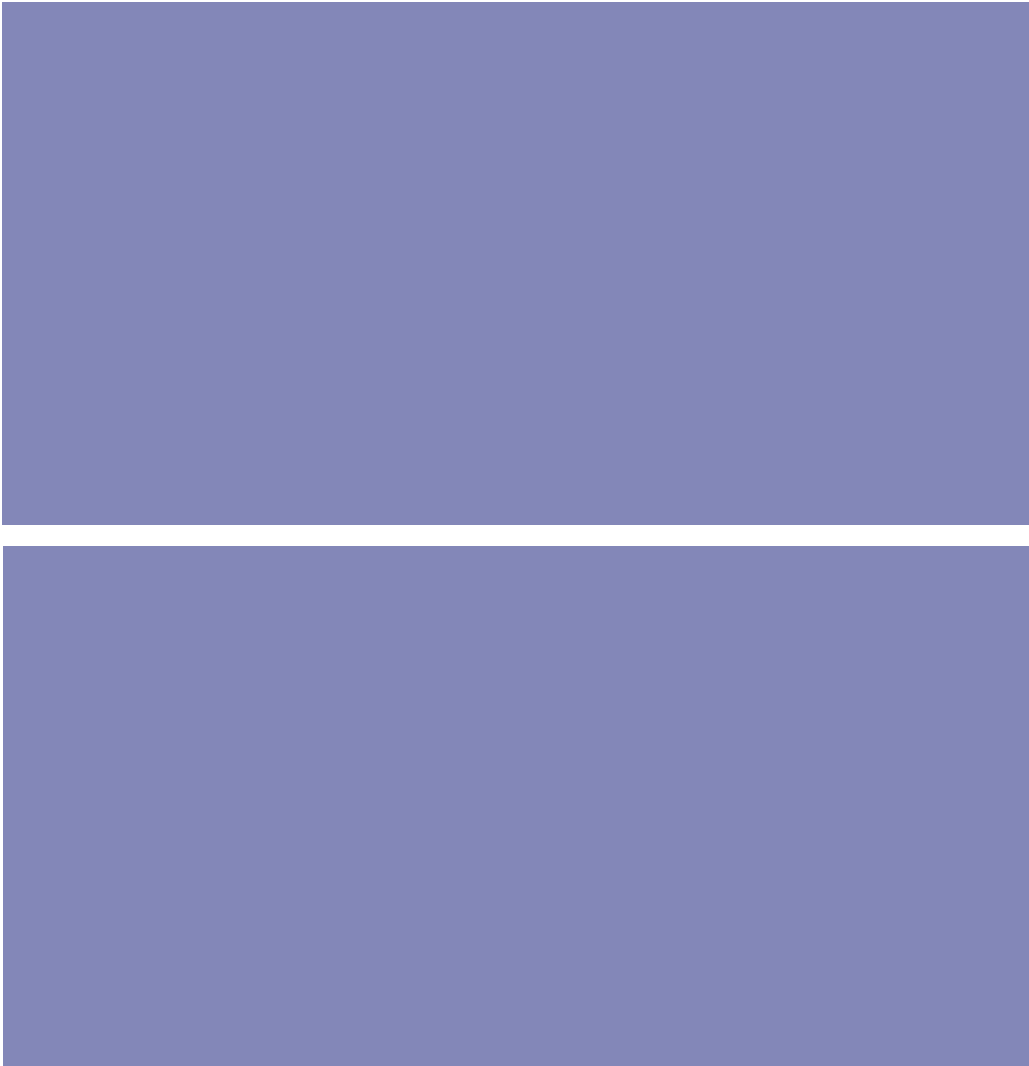


## TACTICAL MEDIA

The concept of tactical media, with its mix of creative subversion and subversive creativity, might offer some grounding here. According to one of the key theorists of the discourse, Geert Lovink, tactical media is: “What happens when the cheap “do it yourself” media are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture” (Garcia and Lovink, 2007). With its origins partly stemming from the counterculture of the 1960s, tactical media use is characterized by a critical, often opportunistic engagement with popular media texts and technologies and by a certain transient and temporary dimension—a sense of “hit and run, draw and withdraw, code and delete” (Meikle, 2008). Like its close cousin culture jamming, it is interventionist by nature and often deals with the visual or performative reversal of media power (Renzi, 2008). These qualities are exemplified by the notorious stunts of The Yes Men, who are often described as the ultimate tactical media practitioners (Lawless, 2018). For artists and activists looking to lay bare the hidden structures of technoculture, tactical media is thus a useful framework to keep in mind.

A sense of the theatrical—and of the performance of media as an important mode of cultural criticism—also underpins many examples of social media art. Critics describe this new practice as a descendant of the 90s net art movement; its artists working “within the confines of corporate-controlled social media sites in an effort to distort and question exactly those confines.” (Kerr, 2017, para. 2) Social media’s pervasiveness is perhaps one of the key reasons that artists from Ai Wei Wei to Constant Dullaart have been compelled to question its inner workings and outward impact. The latter’s 2015 piece, titled *The Possibility of an Army*, is a particularly evocative critique of the artifice of social media engagements. Using automation tools on remote servers through hundreds of proxies around the world, Dullaart created thousands of fictitious profiles on Facebook, using the real names of long-dead mercenaries who fought in the American Revolution (Dullaart, 2015). By challenging Facebook’s security measures, Dullaart’s “fake army” draws attention to the platform’s questionable policies, while discussing the social and economic value of our online identities.

Another project which makes use of the digital proxy as a vehicle for social media critique, is Sarah Ciston’s *ladymouth* bot. Inspired in part by the work of the Fembot Collective, *Ladymouth* is a feminist



chatbot which crawls Reddit for misogynist language, then responds in opposition with quotations from feminist theorists (Ciston, 2019). By inserting itself in places where it is not welcome, the chatbot acts as both a provocation and a spectacle, demonstrating the risk and emotional labour of identifying as female online. At the same time, its non-humanness asks important questions about the role of the ‘technological body’ in feminist digital activism. As Ciston explains: “Perhaps the absurdity of trolls yelling at machines can make trolls yelling at women seem absurd again too.” (*idem*, para. 8)

## BUT DOES IT PLAY?

Critics may discredit these kinds of interventions as ineffective, or even misguided. Indeed, creative activism—as sharp or spectacular as they may be—will never be able to solve the problems of any platform or network culture on their own. But, to borrow from the discourse of tactical media, we can also suggest a different line of questioning:

*To ask of these projects ‘Does it work?’ would be to tap into such questions as, Has it raised public awareness and support? Has it affected government policy? Is there a tangible political outcome? However, to ask instead, Does it play? would be to tap into quite different sorts of questions—questions that point toward the creators or participants and toward the users of the project. (Meikle, 2008)*

From this perspective, focus is shifted from fixing media’s ills to critically and creatively changing the way you or I might engage with it. In the context of social media, this could mean expanding one’s media literacy or experimenting with new habits, intents or identities. As authors Maddison and Scalmer point out in their book *Activist Wisdom* (2006), expressive activism can be especially effective in challenging personal and public complacency.

This perspective, with its emphasis on the civic imagination, is in line with Mary Flanagan’s approach of ‘critical play’. Writing about the intersection of game design, art and activism, she regards play spaces as an important site for the production and consumption of culture, community, language, work and leisure. As she puts it:

*Play is, by definition, a safety space. If a designer or artist can make safe spaces that allow the negotiation of real-world concepts, issues, and ideas, then a game can be successful in facilitating the exploration of innovative solutions for apparently intractable problems. (2009, p. 262)*

At this point, it’s also interesting to note that games have long been used by both artists and activists as critical media. In China for example, multiplayer video games are already being used as ‘benign transport’ for sensitive information, allowing players to bypass government firewalls and transmit data during gameplay (Griffiths, 2015). At the same time, online game culture relates closely to social media culture

in that it too struggles to address the cybermisogyny of its users. In response, artists like Angela Washko have taken to performing subversive, feminist social experiments within popular games like *World of Warcraft*. In her 2012 project, *The Council on Gender Sensitivity and Behavioral Awareness in World of Warcraft*, she repurposed the social features of the game to facilitate discussions between players on the topics of feminism and gender-based discrimination (Washko, 2017).



Critical interventions like these may be especially useful in the context of Indonesia, where the world of gaming takes us back to the meatspace of the *warnet*. In recent years, the *warnet* has evolved into becoming sites for the modern LAN party, favoured by young boys and men in particular who gather there to play sessions of online games like *DOTA* and *League of Legends*. In this hybrid space, perhaps a feminist practice or social critique performed in-game, would more easily impact the player(s) out of it.

With this in mind, could the lens of playculture also offer meaningful approaches for dealing with the problematics of social media? As arenas go, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are already as massively multiplayer as they come. Mechanisms like role-playing, in-game quests and even the management of cooperative versus competitive actions, also naturally exist in social media culture. Only here, skilled players win attention instead of points, identify with hashtags instead of clans, and outmanoeuvre moderators instead of gamemasters. As we close out

this chapter, I suggest that the methods of critical play can help us in further unpacking these parallels. Especially in countries that are more sensitive to dissent, the safe space of games could be a valuable tool for inviting the average netizen to engage with practices of social media activism.

## CONCLUSION

Since I've started writing this paper, censorship in Indonesia has only become more problematic. In the last month alone, a bill has been drafted to limit the creation of music and lyrics that 'bring in negative influences from foreign cultures'. A few weeks later, Indonesia's most populous (and most conservative) province, West Java, announced new restrictions on when certain English-language songs can be aired on television and radio, citing concerns over "vulgar" and "negative" lyrics (Reuters, 2019). While this latest round of assault on pop culture has been met with considerable opposition from free speech advocates and artists alike, it's plain that on the whole, attacks on freedom of expression are becoming more frequent—on and offline. At the same time, political divisions in the country are becoming (and being made) more caustic than ever. Though this is a global issue as much as an Indonesian one, it is especially concerning in a country with such a short history of democracy, and such a long heritage of media control.

For a while, social media offered young people in Indonesia a valuable platform to engage with these questions. Since the beginning of the Reformation era, millennials like myself have embraced it *en force*, using it to connect with others, share personal and political views, consume news, produce memes and engage in wider public discourse. However, it has become evident that the very mechanisms that make social media a megaphone for some are now being used to muzzle others. Today, platforms like Facebook and Instagram are sites of daily power struggles between mainstream and alternative identities, louder and quieter voices. And in Indonesia, where media control veers quickly and frequently into social and moral control, questions of who is included and who is excluded in these spaces are especially urgent for anyone perceived as female, queer, not religious, not traditional or otherwise 'other'.

I put forward that this is where deliberate and creative modes of digital activism can intervene. Because outside of changing the medium itself, what we can do is change how the medium is performed: from the gestures we adopt, to the characters we play. Knowing that social media is neither neutral nor a truthful mirror to society, we can stop treating it as such. And instead of looking away, we can look towards the

trolls and the bots, the astroturfers and the campaign operatives, the fake profiles and the paid posts, to cultivate new practices of resistance and resilience online. For female netizens especially—in Indonesia and elsewhere—there’s much to be gained in stepping outside of our typical, reactionary relationship to social media, and learning to talk back to the mechanisms that try to police or silence us. In any case, it is more important than ever that we critically redefine our understanding of censorship, and the political, cultural and technological frameworks which support it. Because today, censorship is easy to outsource; and what the state allows in the media, easily affects what an algorithm allows in its feed, and even what we allow in each other.

Word count: 8628

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